

# The Skeena Fish Trap Proposal – Observations, Optics and Questions

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There has been much talk of late about a proposal to construct a fish trap on the lower Skeena River. The location of interest is the inter-tidal reach of the Skeena near the Ecstall River confluence. No precise location has been identified publicly but three sites in that general area are presumed candidates. This is the traditional territory of the Lax Kw'alaams First Nations (LFN) whose central community is Lax Kw'alaams, formerly Port Simpson, approximately

40 km as the crow flies north of Prince Rupert. The Ecstall/Skeena confluence is a further 30 km straight line distance south from downtown Rupert. It is only accessible by boat.



A Google Earth image showing the location of points of interest.

The lead organization for the trap proposal is the Washington State based Wild Fish Conservancy. Look them up at <http://www.wildfishconservancy.org>. They embody an impressive list of staff and projects. For a highly informative description of the Columbia project that is being promoted as a template for the Skeena scroll down through the project link at:

<http://www.wildfishconservancy.org/about/press-room/press->



An aerial view of the lower Columbia River pound trap project being promoted as a precursor to a similar operation on the lower Skeena. Photo copied from the Wild Fish Conservancy web site.

The Ecstall River hit the airwaves in August 2018 following the revelation that the Bass Pro empire owner, multi-billionaire, John Morris, had made arrangements with the LFN whereby his wealthy and influential friends went fishing for chinook salmon when all such fishing was closed for conservation reasons throughout the entire Skeena watershed. Considerable detail around that charade has been described here previously ("Ecstall – The Continuing Saga", September 30, 2018. The comments following that article are instructive. Without reviewing that material much of what follows may be difficult to put into context.)

In simple terms what transpired in 2018 amounted to big foreign money buying fishing privileges from the LFN via a permit pursuant

to a communal license issued by DFO to the LFN to accommodate Food Social and Ceremonial (FSC) fishing. Repeated requests to senior staff of DFO for a copy of either the license or the permit allegedly authorized by it have never been answered. In fact numerous messages sent to the upper echelons of both the federal and provincial governments about the 2018 events never received any reply. Months after the fact, however, it emerged there were major differences between competing factions of the LFN (e.g. elected and hereditary chiefs).

Non-FN Ecstall River devotees were fully prepared for a repeat performance in 2019. Local intelligence implied there was more fishing planned. However, the emerging hostility toward Morris' Komaham Lodge based, power broker angling acquaintances plus the vehement opposition of the LFN chiefs on whose traditional territory Morris et al typically landed their helicopters on the Ecstall appears to have been sufficient to discourage that.

The first publicly broadcast information about a trap on the Skeena in the Ecstall confluence vicinity surfaced on September 17, 2019 in the form of a news release from the WFC:

<https://mailchi.mp/ebea1b0c972f/watch-the-new-fish-trap-video-378673?e=75ea13058d>

Two days later, WFC Executive Director Kurt Beardslee was a guest

speaker at a dinner gathering of deep pocketed clients (mostly/all US based I'm told) of a prominent US backed steelhead guiding facility (Epic Waters <https://epicwatersangling.com>) headquartered on the Bulkley River about 8 km upstream from Smithers.

Given my knowledge of the WFC's much publicized Columbia River pound net operation and intimate familiarity with the Skeena I was obviously interested. In fact I had already promoted the Columbia operation a couple of times on my own social media platform but in the context of its potential applicability to the lower Fraser, never the Skeena. What was most curious about the WFC announcement on Sept 17 and Beardslee's presence on the 19<sup>th</sup> was the fact I had dealt directly with him to facilitate his and/or his senior staff's attendance at a Selective Fisheries Symposium being sponsored by the BC Wildlife Federation on Mar 13, 2019 in Coquitlam, BC. Those exchanges occurred in November, 2018 and resulted in Adrian Tuohy, the project lead for the Columbia trap operation, giving a feature presentation at the symposium.

I referenced the WFC's Sept 17 news release in a FaceBook post the day it surfaced and I emphasized that it was no small eye poke that those of us right here in BC who were so obviously interested in alternative fishing strategies and had hosted them at the symposium six months earlier were completely shut out. I later discovered that Mr. Beardslee had been in contact with another Terrace based group "last winter" and had visited the area along with some of his staff on a reconnaissance mission in June of this year.

The connections between the LFN, Bass Pro and the WFC are unknown to me. That is hardly a surprise given the silence from all three camps. There can be no doubt, however, no one is going to operate a fish trap in the traditional territory of the LFN without their full compliance and participation and no one has exploited a relationship with the LFN more than Mr. Morris. If the Bass Pro people were seen in Prince Rupert depositing a fancy new boat in a LFN storage area near the Prince Rupert waterfront in mid-summer, 2019, and the WFC people had been collaborating with the LFN at almost the same time, how plausible is it there is no relationship between the wealthy Bass Pro shop, the successful money soliciting WFC and the opportunistic LFN?

There is still lingering uncertainty, though. During the typical Skeena commercial fishing season of 2019, what little there was, there were loud protests from commercial fishers and their representatives over the lack of fishing opportunity and the need for compensation. Their union spokesperson recommended \$10K per gill net licensee. Coincidentally, an equally strong supporter of the gill netters was the Mayor of Lax Kw'alaams, John Helin, himself a former commercial fisher. Newspaper reports parroted his concern for 55 licensed commercial gill netters he stated lived in his community. The other LFN name that surfaced at the same time was their Director of Fisheries and Aquatics, Bill Shepert. In all of the material that has surfaced around the fish trap proposal via the WFC neither of these names has appeared. Does that not raise questions?

Getting down to the trap itself and the objectives, many more questions surface. Did the WFC not notice during their reconnaissance missions and collaboration with the LFN there are

some rather significant differences between the Columbia and the Skeena? For example, the tidal fluctuations at the Columbia trap site may reach one meter. On the Skeena the amplitude is seven times that. Did anyone pay attention to current velocities and the implications for operating fixed gear under such circumstances? The test fishery at Tyee on the lower Skeena is almost directly opposite the Ecstall River confluence. Tyee employs one-hour drifts for a reason. How about debris? There is virtually none on the Columbia because it is essentially a series of reservoirs upstream from the trap site and any debris that accumulates is easily removed. Contrast that with the free-flowing Skeena whose annual hydrograph bears no resemblance to the fully impounded Columbia's.

What is a trap going to accomplish? Would it replace a significant proportion of the conventional gill net fleet or be in addition to it? Proponents from the Epic Waters organization, the one actively campaigning for donations and partnering with Patagonia on the basis that the latter will match any contribution from patrons of their operations, are claiming it will replace the test fishery. They are suggesting cameras would be installed and anyone could tune in on You Tube to observe escapements. Even if an effective fish trapping device did ever materialize, has anyone thought about water clarity under freshet conditions and 7 m tides? How far can credibility be stretched?

Has anyone paid attention to the costs of the Columbia trap operation? It's consumed more than \$900K since late 2016. I'll offer that the physical conditions on the Skeena would consume a much higher sum over any comparable period.

The primary purpose of the Columbia trap would seem to demonstrate there is a very real option available to distinguish between endangered wild stocks/species and harvestable hatchery stocks/species. On the Skeena, there is no such thing as hatchery vs wild or endangered species legislation to force harvesters to abide by conservation regulations. The best that could be hoped for is to be able to harvest surplus individuals of a species, not a stock within it. The reality is the only harvestable surplus that exists in the Skeena today (and greatly diminished at that) is the enhanced Babine sockeye stock. Virtually every other non-enhanced sockeye stock and every other species (with the possible exception of low value pinks and late returning lower river coho in some years) is no longer capable of sustaining any commercial harvest. How would the harvestable enhanced Babine sockeye caught in a trap in the conventional commercial fishing areas adjacent to the Ecstall be distinguishable from all the other non-Babine, non-enhanced sockeye stocks that have been a major conservation concern for many years? If conservation is as important a feature of a trap as its proponents allege, why wouldn't they just harvest any surplus enhanced sockeye at the Babine weir or in Babine Lake as has been proven viable by the Lake Babine First Nation already?

The Columbia trap does not catch a significant proportion of the passing stocks and I see no evidence of it being applied as a meaningful abundance estimation tool. How then do the Skeena trap proponents see their idea of calibrating or replacing the existing Tyee test fishery? A great deal of time, money and technical expertise has been applied to that test fishery over many years to improve its efficacy. Much of that involved comparing catches with different net types. Assuming a functional trap was installed



somewhere in the vicinity, how many years of consistent operation would be required before there was even the most remote possibility of calibrating it relative to Tyee? How many more before replacing Tyee?

Who decides what approvals are required to proceed with a trap experiment? If government agencies are involved no evidence has surfaced thus far. Or, is this just a further example of a First Nation doing whatever it likes because it can in our bold new world of "reconciliation"?

Who would be the gatekeeper for any data that might eventually emerge from a trap operation? It is impossible to extract any credible information from either DFO or any Skeena First Nation on their catch/harvest of steelhead in a given year. I have numerous unanswered inquiries to DFO on that business filed away. Are we now going to hand over the future of Skeena steelhead and salmon management to, not just historically uncooperative First Nations fishers but foreign NGO operations partnered with them, for financial gain? Where does that leave BC/Canadian residents who pay taxes to have governments manage fisheries on behalf of all Canadians? Where does a lowly license purchasing, law abiding Skeena recreational angler fall out in all of this?

Lest I be considered an opponent of alternatives to gill nets for commercial fishing pursuits, I'll offer up the scars in my back in evidence of my history on that subject. I'm 100% in favor of ridding our waters of notoriously non-selective and destructive gill nets,

regardless of who deploys them. A trap or a series of them strategically deployed and operated in the Skeena approaches (i.e. not in the areas currently proposed) could serve some useful purpose if they were in replacement of gill nets and if the operation and data collection was not essentially privatized.

Do potential donors being solicited for contributions to advance this initiative understand any of the above? Has any of it ever been laid out for them? If not, I submit the proponents are operating under false pretense.

December 17, 2019   Bob Hooton   Uncategorized

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## 10 responses to “The Skeena Fish Trap Proposal – Observations, Optics and Questions”

1.  **Jesse** says:

December 17, 2019 at 10:36 pm Edit

Excellent points as always.

Thanks, Bob.

[Reply](#)

2.  **BRYAN HEBDEN** says:

December 17, 2019 at 11:24 pm [Edit](#)

A series of fish traps along the length of the Skeena River would seem to be the best solution in that they would allow ownership and operation of those traps (and fish) to the bands associated with each reach of the Skeena. I believe one trap to the exclusion of all other traps and gillnets would be unrealistic and not something that the individual bands and members of those bands would subscribe to as fishing activity is part of FN's culture. Of course this change in fishing technique to the abandonment of gill nets would have to be endorsed by all of the bands along the Skeena and not by recreational anglers. To that end, I am not particularly optimistic.

[Reply](#)

3. **Benson** says:

December 18, 2019 at 1:20 am [Edit](#)

Why are we eating "wild" fish? That's what I think about it. Despite the theoretical sustainability brainwashing it is not, ... "sustainable". "Dude,.. I'm stuffing my face eating "wild" salmon with a Patagonia sweater on helping the environment, ... Like how cool is that!" "Let's twist up another one." That's the conversation being had by the typical trendy urban nitwit Patagonia customer. This is among things that make me frigging scream!

Put an FN face on it and it's one with nature? Hogwash! Okay, it's gentle. Okay, it's selective but it is only better on a scale of bad. The numbers aren't there for an ever increasing affluent

industrialized society to keep consuming "wild". This proposal isn't instead of gillnets, it's in addition to. Are up Skeena bands getting their piece of the action?

They do this and I am going get to work on a computer generated video. That aerial video will pan upstream from this trap showing the banks littered with dead emaciated upland salmon dependent wild animals that would have otherwise been nourished except Patagonia literally stole their sustenance and transferred it to their North American stores to be consumed by urban nitwits instead. My computer generated film will put a colorful little Patagonia puff vest with maggots crawling from under it on each one of the dead emaciated wild creatures, highlighting their cruel destruction for Patagonia gain. Get ready, Patagonia here we come!

Move farming on shore above the flood plane and raise fish in a closed contained system. Collapse the wild market. That's where Patagonia should extend their influence. There are hundreds of hatcheries on the Columbia River Watershed. Each is a candidate to be subsidized by Patagonia to be modified into a closed-contained operation. Each could be joint ventured with an FN Band in exchange for the promise they forego their claim to "wild".

The Skeena is wild! Keep it that way! This will only increase the call for an enhanced fishery. That hasn't worked anywhere it's been tried.

Reply

4. **Andrew Riley** says:

December 18, 2019 at 2:33 am Edit

Billionaires,DFO,FN:

No hope of transparency with that trio. Will definitely take advantage of any "loophole" found in any "awarded reconciliation acts, government mandates, or pilfering the public's trust"!

Reply

o **Drew Alway** says:

December 20, 2019 at 3:58 am Edit

Hopefully the science and engineering of this proposal makes sense before DFO and the province authorize it ( if they have the powers to do so), is evaluated and is shared. If it doesn't then another site or selective method should be chosen. One thing is for sure: no changes from non-selective gill nets will occur in this province without FN partnership or support. I hope the data is public and credible. How can it be considered a replacement when one is public and the other private information? Then it's not a replacement. Something like this better take time. I would consider any proposal to be a prototype, which hopefully fisheries manager can learn from. Yes, I agree it sounds expensive.

Reply

5. **Steve Morrow** says:

December 21, 2019 at 12:24 am Edit

Hey Bob thanks for picking up the subject. I think we all see the value of selective fisheries and certainly mirror some of your concerns. I would say this is pilot and by nature meant to answer some of those questions. Epic Waters was made aware of the project last year and has actively been trying to fundraise for what I see as a good cause. To suggest we are much more than a cheerleader though would be inaccurate. In

our world, the much maligned non resident angler has an avenue here to contribute directly to something they might find important- mainly commercial interception (although the trap ticks other boxes). I'd love to be as important to big picture conservation as the article suggests but it's just not the reality. In any event could be a major step forward in species specific harvest.

Reply

◦ **Bob Hooton** says:

December 21, 2019 at 3:44 am Edit

Fair comment Steve and thank you for making it. The contorted world of fish politics creates more illusions and misconceptions than I could ever have imagined when outside influences prompted me to start this blog. I agree, everyone who shares the passion for eking out a future for our fish resources (not the least of them, Skeena steelhead) needs to be on the same page and the efforts of Epic Waters to garner support in that context are commendable. Selective harvest is the only game in town. Let's keep the lines of communication between all of us with an interest in that respect open and well lubricated. Thank again.

Reply

6. **Benson** says:

December 23, 2019 at 1:35 pm Edit

Steve Morrow:

Why Fish With Epic

At the heart of Epic's identity is the belief that you shouldn't

have to sacrifice the comforts of home in order to experience some of the world's most beautiful, rugged landscapes and incredible adventures. We own and operate several first-class lodges in remote British Columbia and endorse others around the world.

This is a cut and paste from the Epic Waters page.... you want to "provide the much maligned foreign angler an avenue to contribute to something they might find important"? I don't think so. I don't exactly understand what the agenda is here but you are more than a cheerleader. Call me crazy for asking,... is there any chance your cheerleading might buy you future access? Are you scratching some aboriginal backs?

Why would foreign anglers want to invest in compounding existing harvest in addition to selective harvest? Why would they want to underwrite that incremental increase in the demise of habitat?

If you really want to assist the much maligned foreign angler then I'd suggest you step into the public spotlight, join hands with Terrace and Smithers Chambers of Commerce to roll back foreign segregation from you waterways.

Sorry, I'm not buying what your "cheerleading".

Reply

7. **Robert Blain** says:

December 31, 2019 at 2:30 am Edit

several things come to mind out of this discussion. The first being that regardless of our personal opinions the simple fact is as it stands right now Salmon management is the sole mandated responsibility of the federal government (DFO) Any management / co management policies or methodology all

have to include DFO at some point. The second thing is that if they do away with the gill net test fishery at Tyee they will never have accurate data again on returns. I like the idea and I know that traps and fish wheels have been used moderately successfully on rivers like the Stikine for example and could potentially be effective on the Skeena and Nass but they would need to be temporary, mobile and seasonal as they would have been traditionally. just my two cents.

Reply

◦ **Bob Hooton** says:

December 31, 2019 at 4:33 pm Edit

Right on all accounts Bob. One additional concern, though. The way DFO operates in the world of the present is "government to government". You and I will know nothing of what is discussed and agreed upon in those closed door sessions. Between the secrecy demonstrated by the foreign Non-government organization who purports to lead us to the promised land through their own private dealings with the Lax Kw'alaams people and government shutting out the taxpayers, how is it that those of us who pay the freight for all of this get to be heard? Welcome to a new decade!

Reply

## Leave a Reply

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